Jukebox Shootout

Six Music Managers For Your Listening Pleasure

Where music is concerned, many of us take for granted a combination of technologies that have only been around a relatively short time. We now have personal archives of digital music with thousands of ultra-high-quality songs and the ability to download almost any song imaginable for under a $1 and make that music collection available throughout the home or take it with us when we're away.

Many pieces work together to make all of this possible, including a big hard drive, home network, and portable music player, but music manager software is the glue that holds it all together. Think of it as a jukebox that lets you organize and expand your music collection. These apps can also introduce you to new music and let you buy music online. Many apps incorporate video, too, letting you watch television programs, news, and other content.

I looked at six popular media players. The one that's right for you will depend on the features you want, its compatibility with your portable music player, and the price you're willing to pay. Unfortunately, another important factor is your tolerance level for advertising, as some jukebox programs use their screen real estate as an unbridled opportunity to bombard you with ads for everything from software upgrades to medication.

Apple iTunes 6

iTunes ships with the iPod, but it isn't one of those barely functional bundled utilities you hate to use. In fact, there are plenty of reasons to use it as your PC media manager, even if you don't own an iPod. The interface is sleek and fast, and you can find the song or playlist that you want on a moment's notice, even with a huge music library.

As a music manager, iTunes excels. If you want to find a particular song or all the songs by a particular artist in your collection, type a few letters in the Search field, and your collection is filtered instantly. Smart Playlists will automatically play your favorite songs, the ones most recently added, tunes from a certain era, songs you haven't heard lately, or songs based on whatever other criteria you can dream up.

iTunes includes great support for free online content. The app can check RSS feeds for podcasts and download them automatically. Additionally, it can play some types of streaming radio stations, and it comes preloaded with a fair-sized list of stations organized by genre.

You can rip CDs using MP3, AAC, Apple's Lossless Encoder, and other codecs. You can also add support for Ogg Vorbis via a plug-in. If you have iTunes installed on more than one computer on your network, you can play songs stored on other computers, creating a centralized music server, or just spy on your co-workers' musical tastes. (Because iTunes is available for Mac OS X and Windows XP, you can even play music on a system with another OS.)

The iTunes Music Store is a nicely integrated part of the application, letting you choose from myriad individual tracks for 99 cents each or entire albums usually for $9.99. I like the Music Store, but I love that you can turn it off—a gracious feature lacking in many other applications with music stores. The Mini-store, which offers up new music selections that match what you're currently listening to, is disabled by default. You can eliminate access to the store entirely via the Preferences window.

Naturally, iTunes and an iPod go hand-in-hand, and iTunes delivers utilitarian features for iPod users. iTunes does work with a handful of other portable players, including Nomad and Rio, but not nearly as many as WMP and RealPlayer do. (DRM-protected songs from the iTunes Music Store won't work with those third-party players.) If you're married to another portable player, chances aren't great that iTunes will work with it.

iTunes 6
Free
Apple
www.apple.com/itunes

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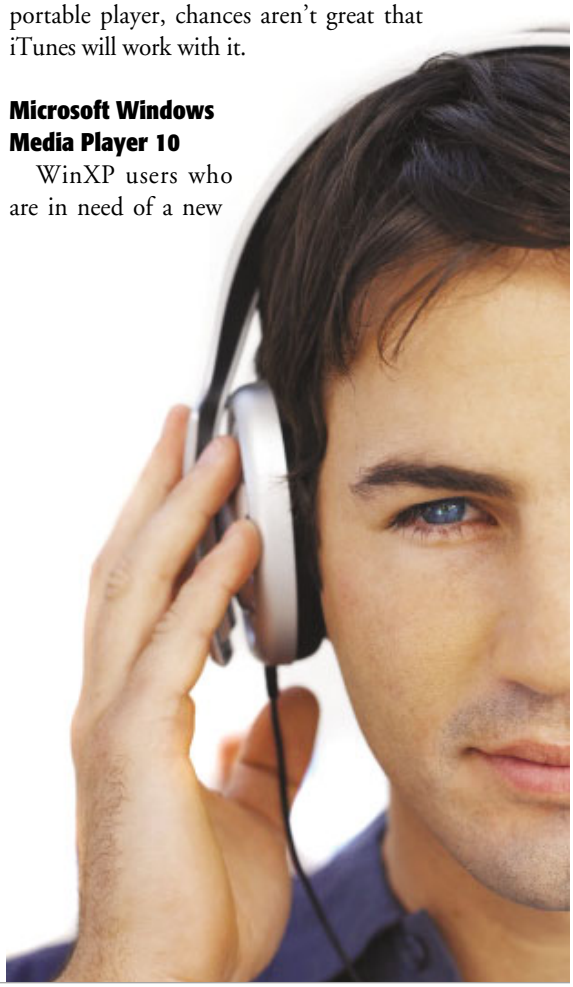
Microsoft Windows Media Player 10

WinXP users who are in need of a new



CPU RANKING ○ 0 = ABSOLUTELY WORTHLESS | ●●◖ 2.5 = ABSOLUTELY AVERAGE | ●●●●● 5 = ABSOLUTELY PERFECT

music manager might be tempted to reach for Windows Media Player 10. After all, it's free and familiar; you already have an older version preinstalled with WinXP.

The features are certainly here. You can listen to music in most file formats, rip songs from CD, and burn songs to CD. You can browse your music library by genre, year, artist, and rating and enjoy various visualizations while you listen. You can even watch music videos and tune into Internet radio stations. WMP10 can synch your music with about 70 models of portable music players, smartphones, and Windows-based PDAs, but it doesn't support the iPod.

WMP10 does it all, but it isn't particularly satisfying to use. The interface is overly cluttered with layers of tabs and several browsing environments. Advertisements, upsell attempts, and pop-up warnings about digital rights management often interject themselves. Additionally, the UI is overdone with several Web-like browsing environments. There's one under the Guide tab, a music shopping site under the Music tab, and another for music videos under the Video tab. The clutter is confusing and unnecessary, with offers to buy stuff seemingly everywhere.

Microsoft is all about DRM, so WMP is wrapped up in layers of DRM that frequently get in the way. The default format for ripping CDs is Windows Media Audio, and the only alternative is MP3, and you get the feeling Microsoft provides that only grudgingly. MP3 is listed in the Rip Settings menu in lowercase below three flavors of WMA, and there's no ability to encode MP3s at 160Kbps. Encoding for Ogg Vorbis and other file formats are conspicuously missing from the ripping options, but you can acquire some with plug-ins.

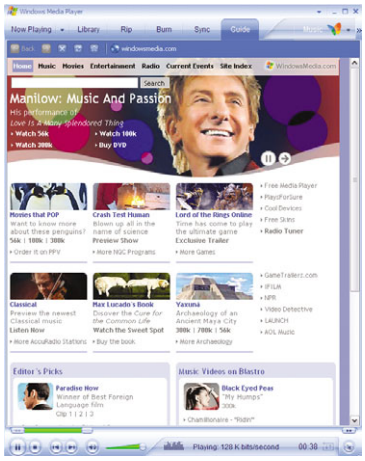
If you don't have a towering stack of CDs to rip, WMP10 offers many choices to keep you entertained. There's a built-in music store where you can buy single tracks, usually for 99 cents each, or entire albums for about $9 and up. You can also choose the Radio Plus service, which offers unlimited ad-free music for $30 a year. You're not even limited to those two options. WMP can play a bevy of different protected file formats, including from Napster, MusicMatch, and others (provided you have the proper licenses, of course). The program also provides access to free streaming radio stations and a selection of music videos. My enjoyment of both was often preceded by annoying video advertisements, however.

WMP10 continually treats you like a consumer (and not a particularly trustworthy one, at that), making it difficult to just sit back and enjoy the music.

Mystik Media Blaze Media Pro 6.1

Blaze Media Pro tackles a different angle than the other programs here. It doesn't do as much in terms of managing your music collection, but what it brings to the party are plenty of tools for converting, editing, and playing audio/video files. The program is $50 after a free two-week trial.

Blaze plays a multitude of A/V formats. Audio coverage includes any format you'd care to use, and the video formats include AVI, several MPEG flavors, and WMV. As a media player, Blaze does a great job with its sleek interface and intuitive controls. Blaze's real power, however, is in its format-conversion and editing features.



Windows Media Player 10

Free
Microsoft
www.microsoft.com/windows/windowsmedia/mp10

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With the click of a button, you can easily convert audio files between MP3, WMA, Ogg Vorbis, and WAV formats. You can convert DVD audio to any of those formats, as well as rip CDs. You can use the DVD sound ripping to extract a favorite song or audio track from a movie disc, although the process happens in real time, so it can take a while. The program also does video conversion between AVI, MPEG, and MPEG formats. With batch processing, you can do multiple conversions in one fell swoop.

Blaze also includes a waveform audio editor, which is handy for removing a

Blaze Media Pro 6.1

$50
Mystik Media
www.blazemp.com

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Winamp 5.21
Free; $19.95, Pro version
Nullsoft
www.winamp.com

RealPlayer 10.5
Free; $19.99, Plus version
Real Networks
www.real.com

lengthy song intro or amplifying a quiet segment, for instance. The editor is about on par with the open-source Audacity, but it's convenient to have all the audio tools under one umbrella. You can also use the editor to capture audio from a microphone, phonograph, or streaming audio source. A timer lets you record online radio programs when you're away.

Blaze Media is probably best for users who already have stacks of audio CDs to convert or a directory full of music files. Aside from tools for capturing audio, it doesn't provide much in the way of getting new music; there's no integrated music store or built-in support for streaming radio. Although the media manager lets you create and save playlists, it's rather sparse compared to programs such as iTunes and WMP. Blaze Media can't quickly sift through your music collection to show music by a particular artist, for example.

Blaze Media Pro works with Windows 98 SE/Me/2000/XP, and according to the company, version 7 should be available as you read this. That version will include an updated video DVD burner feature, improved capture of long audio recordings with automatic track splitting, and the ability to convert video formats to Flash.

Nullsoft Winamp 5.21

Winamp is a long-time favorite among enthusiasts; it's small, stable, and reliable. Despite AOL having purchased Winamp, the player manages not to be offensively commercial.

Winamp is available in three versions. The free Full version is quite adequate as a music player and media manager, providing CD burning, synching with portable devices (including the iPod), and access to free streaming online radio. There are two major limitations, though; it can't rip CDs to MP3 (although it can rip to AAC, aacPlus, and WMA), and it burns CDs at a maximum speed of 2X. A $19.95 Pro version solves both issues. There's also a stripped-down Lite version that serves as a basic MP3/AAC player with virtually no other features. It's free and only a 1MB download, but the Full version does much more, and at 5.5MB it's far from bloatware.

The default interface is svelte and unobtrusive, and its clean look is a welcome departure from the full-screen environments other music software delivers. On the downside, Winamp's basic UI can be difficult to decipher with its tiny, poorly labeled buttons. You can download free skins to change the interface, however.

The media library is the core of the program. Here you can browse your music collection in various ways, including seeking out the newest, most-played, or favorite tunes, for example. Many features here are similar to those in iTunes, such as Smart Views, which let you build custom playlists based on any combination of criteria.

Even if you don't have any music files or own a single CD, you can groove right away thanks to oodles of free streaming content. ShoutCast Radio delivers thousands of online radio stations in every conceivable genre, and AOL Radio provides content from XM Satellite Radio. There's video streaming, too, as the ShoutCast TV feature provides instant access to all manner of television shows, while AOL Videos lets you watch content from CNN, comedy videos, and more. Winamp also has excellent support for podcasts; you can browse through hundreds of podcasts, subscribe to your favorite feeds to listen online, or download them.

With easy access to streaming content, podcasts, and free MP3s at Winamp.com,

Let The Music Do The Talking

Like every other software category, there's the cream of the crop and the also-rans in the media-manager segment. All but one of these apps offers a free version, so check them out. Here's a brief look at how these six jukeboxes match up.

	OSes Supported	iPod Support	Access To Free Content	Advertising
Blaze Media Pro 6.1	Windows 98/Me/2000/XP	No	None	None
iTunes 6	WinXP, Mac OS X	Yes	Podcasts, streaming radio directory	Low (can be disabled)
MusicMatch Jukebox 10	WinXP	No	None	Moderate
RealPlayer 10.5	Win98/Me/2000/XP; Mac OS X; Linux	Yes	None	Very high
Winamp 5.21	Win98/Me/2000/XP	Yes	Podcasts, streaming audio and video directories	Low
Windows Media Player 10	WinXP	Yes	Streaming audio directory	High

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Winamp delivers a satisfying combination of apps and free content.

Real Networks RealPlayer 10.5

RealPlayer's over-the-top advertising was so offensive it would have worn out its welcome on my PC in three minutes had I not been writing this review. The quantity and type of ads make WMP seem serene by comparison. RealPlayer bombs you with pop-up ads, audio/video ads that appear unbidden, and more. I counted a dozen ads on the main Real Guide page alone.

The program handles most audio and video formats, as well as video. The software is available in a free basic version and $19.99 RealPlayer Plus version. The free version is so crippled it's almost unusable, which is maddening because you know the missing features are in there if you pay for the Plus version or SuperPass.

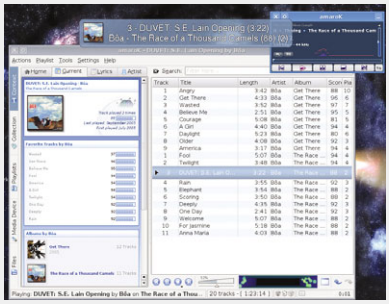
The Plus version adds higher-quality audio and video, 90 ad-free radio stations, a 10-band graphic equalizer, additional CD burning features, and other gizmos. You can also opt for the SuperPass, which costs an additional $12.99 per month (after a 14-day trail). If you're willing to pay that monthly dosh, RealPlayer's content shines. You'll get access to videos from iFilm, music downloads, news and sports from BBC and Sporting News, and more. SuperPass also enables RealPlayer with all the features RealPlayer Plus adds. There's also the optional RealArcade, which provides access to 300 downloadable games. You don't own that content, though. Let your subscription lapse, and your access to most of the songs, games, and videos will vanish.

Did I mention the ads? The program is relentless. When you boot up your computer, even before you've launched any programs, RealPlayer accosts you with pop-ups about new content it thinks you might want to see.

Like WMP and iTunes, there's a music store (songs start at 49 cents) and the ability to rip and burn CDs and sync music with a wide variety of portable players (including the iPod). But I wouldn't bother. There's nothing wrong with a company charging for content, but there is something wrong with giving away "free" software with the primary purpose seemingly being to deliver an onslaught of video ads. I'd rather listen to tunes on an old 8-track than deal with this offensive software another minute.

The Best Music Player For Linux?

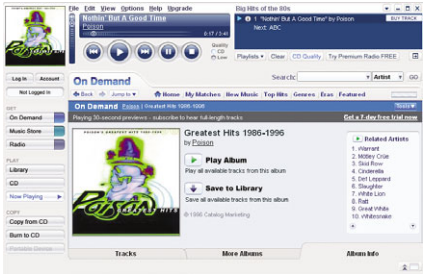
Need an audio player for your Linux box? Chances are you already have XMMS. It comes preinstalled with many distributions and is a perfectly serviceable media player. But for a complete, integrated music-management tool, nothing can beat amaroK (amarok.kde.org). amaroK, which requires the KDE desktop environment, provides a 10-band equalizer, automatic download of cover art and lyrics, and other cool features for music lovers. There's also support for the iPod (as well as many other portable players) and podcasts. Oh, and the "super eye-candy interface" is fun, too.



Yahoo! MusicMatch Jukebox 10

MusicMatch Jukebox 10 is a well-rounded program that can organize your music, rip and burn CDs, and synch with many portable music players. Like many of the other players, Jukebox is available in free and paid versions. The $19.99 Plus version lets you rip and burn CDs more quickly than the free version, print CD labels and inserts, and record MP3s from your LPs or other outside audio sources.

Either way, one of MusicMatch's coolest features is AutoDJ, which puts other players' shuffle functions to shame. AutoDJ can mix up your music based on genre, tempo, and other criteria, so the mood won't jump from Paul Anka to Metallica. You can also drag in a couple songs you're in the mood for, and the app will populate the rest of the playlist with related artists.



MusicMatch Jukebox 10
Free; $19.99, Plus version
Yahoo!
www.musicmatch.com
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Like RealPlayer and WMP, there are several ways to add to your music library. A music store offers most tracks for 99 cents and albums for $8.49. Another level of service, MusicMatch On Demand, provides access to 900,000 songs for $59.88 a year or $4.99 per month. (The songs are only available while you remain a subscriber.) Unlike RealPlayer and WMP, MusicMatch is tolerable if you don't want to upgrade the service. There are occasional exhortations to upgrade, but they don't reach the level of frantic desperation of those other programs.

A few features are missing in MusicMatch 10, notably because they were in version 9. Access to free streaming radio stations seems to have disappeared in favor of the On Demand service. Handy access to any artist's discography, bio, and other information has similarly vanished.

Yahoo! owns MusicMatch, in addition to offering Yahoo! Music Unlimited (music.yahoo.com/unlimited). A Yahoo! spokesperson called the overlap between Unlimited and MusicMatch "confusing" and says the two will be rolled into a single product later this year. It's not known, however, what the new music product will be called. While we don't know what the future holds, MusicMatch Jukebox is for now a strong choice for users who want access to a variety of online content. ▲

by Kevin Savetz

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